

The Donner Summit

Heirloom

History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society



December, 2014 issue #76

The Auburn Ski Club

from California Ski News, 1930's

A weird sort of enjoyment, or at least a non-mainstream sort of enjoyment, comes from perusing old periodicals. In fact the DSHS has a whole department devoted to the perusal of old newspapers and magazines. In this case a considerable amount of enjoyable time was spent looking through a collection of Auburn Ski Club newsletters, the California Ski News, which are housed at the Auburn Ski Club's Western SkiSport Museum at Boreal Ski Area on Donner Summit. For more on the museum see last month's Heirloom.

From that exercise our team extracted interesting tidbits about the Auburn Ski Club. The team started with the newsletter in January, 1931 and just kept reading, year after year. If you want more of the Club's history go back to our December '12 and January '13 Heirlooms.

There may be no organization that has contributed more to the popularization of winter sports in the Sierra than the Auburn Ski Club, particularly while it was headed by Wendell Robie. Currently the Auburn Ski Club is located at Boreal Ridge at the very top of Donner Pass on I-80. They lease the land there to Powder Corp. which operates Boreal Ski area and Woodward at Tahoe.

The California Ski News

Published every Tuesday during the Winter Sports Season by the Auburn Ski Club

Vol. 2 No. 2

Auburn, California

Tuesday, Dec. 27, 1932

The Club's goal "...was ... to encourage winter travel to the snow region, thereby benefitting the railroads, gasoline companies, hotels and business men who would sell winter sports equipment." (12/26/33)

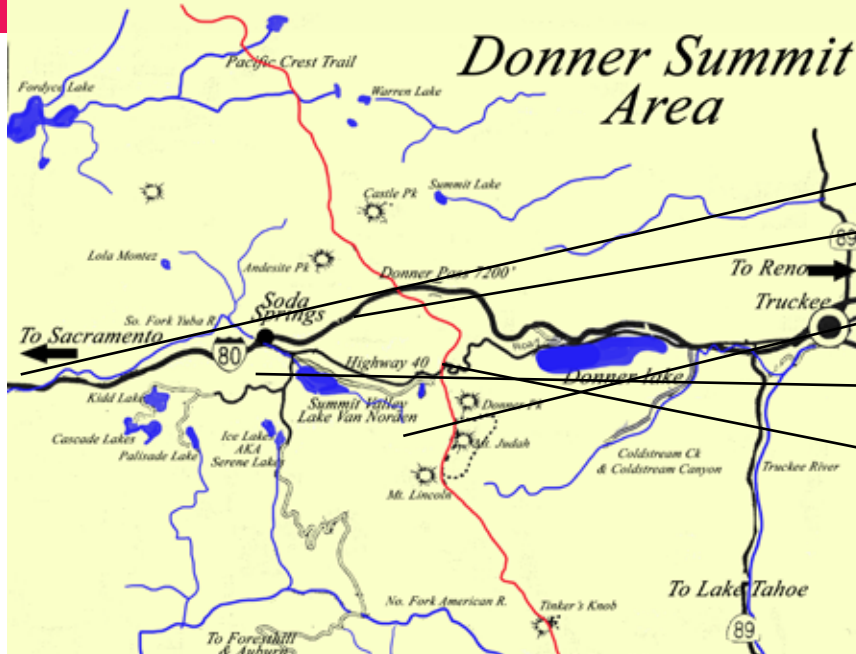
The Club engaged in many activities to publicize the attractions of the Sierra in winter. Two of their most exotic ventures were bringing snow to Berkeley and building a ski jump there, and putting on a ski jumping exhibition at the 1939 World's Fair on Treasure Island. (see the December '12 and February '13 Heirlooms). Most of the Club's activities were more prosaic though: their newsletter, publicity, tournaments, winter carnivals, ski teams, hosting other clubs at their ski area, lodging, lessons, etc. One of their biggest successes was inducing the State of California to plow Highway 40 in winter, allowing access to automobilists after snowfall starting in 1931 (see the August '10 Heirloom).

Short History of the Auburn Ski Club from January 18, 1934

California used to be known only for sunshine and oranges. Any snow related recreation was limited to driving up to the snow line, a "place to go once a year to throw snowballs, get good and wet, and almost freeze to death on the way home. Very few people were skiing." The Auburn Ski Club set out to change that.

On February 27, 1929 a few people met in Auburn to talk about starting a ski club. By the next day the club had been formed and officers elected. Wendell Robie was the first president. They took one ski trip to Soda Springs in April but that was it for the

Story Locations in this Issue



In This Issue

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Then/Now pg 14, 15

What's in Your Closet?

Erin Seay lives in Davis. Her father and aunt passed away recently leaving behind a large collection of pictures. Erin has been working to send the pictures to where they belong i.e. places where they will really be appreciated, "so they can be enjoyed by others."

Therefore Erin contacted the DSHS by email asking if we'd like an early picture of Donner Summit Bridge. Of course we would and here it is with the original now filling a spot in one of Norm's many binders of Donner Summit pictures. Erin made the donation in the name of the James B. Seay and Jackieoe Maguire estates. Then she put a note on the picture (which peeled off readily) saying, "So glad this has found the perfect home."

It might have been easy for Erin to dispose of the photo but she did not, preferring that others get to enjoy it as well. We thank her for thinking of us and for saving a little history.



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Unless otherwise noted, the photographs and other historical ephemera in The Heirloom's pages come from the Norm Saylor collection at the Donner Summit Historical Society

season.

During the summer club members began looking for a spot to build a club house and jumping hill. Canyon Creek, elevation 4800 feet, just above Baxter on what is now I-80, was decided upon. Work began, mostly on Sundays because that was the one day off a week the members had. A shelter house and ski jump were built. After some discussion the grounds were open to the public and not just members. Admission was charged on tournament days. The first tournament was held on January 26, 1930 and there were cross country races and jumping competition.

It was soon apparent that the ski hill was too small and the club scouted ridges from "Baxter's to Soda Springs" but no place was found that could be accessible to automobiles all year.

During the second year the California Division of Highways did some experimenting and discovered they could keep Highway 40 open year round. With that assurance the Auburn Ski Club purchased an option on a ski hill at Cisco Grove. There they purchased 100 acres along the south bank of the Yuba and which adjoined 640 government owned acres along the "Auburn Lake Tahoe" highway and the Southern Pacific tracks.



Auburn Ski Club at Cisco. Their clubhouse is in the background. The bridge crossed the Yuba River from Highway 40. The bridge and clubhouse have been replaced by I-80 and the Club has gone up to Boreal Ridge.

The Club was already gaining recognition because of the ability of its skiers who competed in tournaments.

The Club began working on their new ski hill in the fall of 1931 and had plans for Class A and B jumps (so contestants could try for world records), an ice rink and slalom course down "Ski Mountain" (on the south side of the Yuba River and going above the RR tracks at Cisco). The first slalom race in California had been at the Auburn Ski Club in January of 1931. The National Championship ski tournament was held at the Club in February of 1931.

Dues were initially only \$1 and the club built a shelter house at the ski hill 58 feet long 20 feet wide. The new Class A ski hill was the largest in North America in 1932 and the Auburn Ski Club saw possibilities of winter sports in California to rival those in Europe and the East. "no other Sierra snow area with such wide and open snow fields so close to the large centers of population around San Francisco Bay as that reached by the Auburn Highway."

The new ski area was described as "wide clear snow fields... open view of deep scenic canons [sic] and mountains in all directions. Here are fast ski runs a few feet from your car.... Nowhere else in Northern California is found such a field, so accessible to the great centers of population." The Club advertised skiing from December to June.

The Haul Back of Pull Back

One of the Club's innovations was the Haul Back ski lift. In January, 1933 the Club had considered the problem that "The ski hill is so big that the effort to climb to the top for more than two jumps in an afternoon is a severe tax on strength and each climb requires considerable time. The savings in time [of having a method of taking skiers to the top] would make the jumping of great interest to the spectators."

The solution might have been found back east in Shawbridge, Quebec or closer by in Yosemite. The Club decided that "a

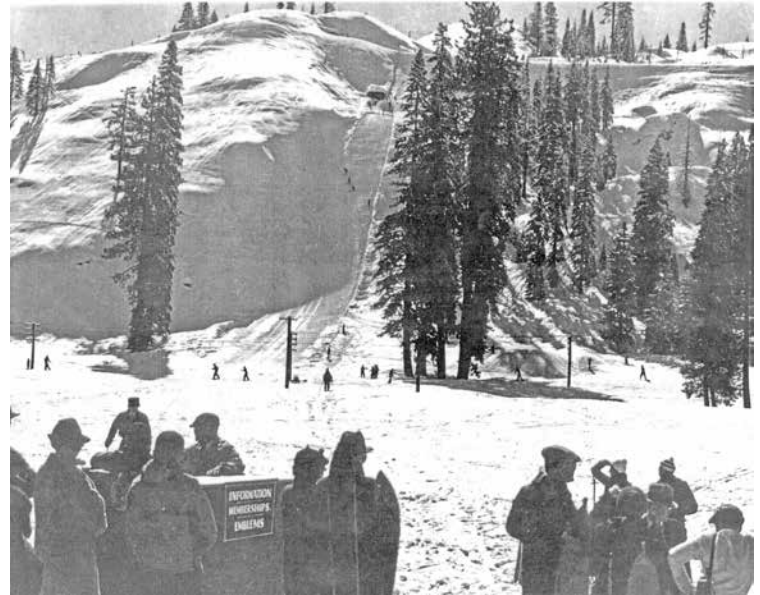


pullback up Tunnel Mountain could be used for the Big Hill, but also for the Slalom riders and touring parties wanting to save time and effort in the climb for the downhill ride.”

Here is what piqued the interest of the Auburn Ski Club from the *Ski Bulletin* of Boston, “On Sunday, January 1, 1933, it was just a shaken-down snowed-under old derelict of a Dodge, parked in the snow off to one side at the bottom of the “big hill,” at Shawbridge, with two men tinkering away in the 15 below zero atmosphere. On the Monday, January 2, 1933, it was an answer to the down—hill ski runner’s prayer. Not a funicular, but better, a 2,000 foot endless rope, passed through block at top and bottom of its span of two thirds of the hill, and around a special hub on the rear axle of the above mentioned Dodge. No schedules, no wait for the next train, just a constantly moving rope at about 15 miles an hour, which the skiers with the “price” could grab, at whatever part of the hill the desire to climb struck his fancy. Five cents a trip or fifty cents a day.”

The Auburn Ski Club built an “Up Ski” which consisted of two toboggans attached to a cable. As one went up with skiers sitting on it, the other went down. The lift had an elevation gain of 300 feet and was 1,000 feet long. One of those toboggans is still sitting on the side of the old ski mountains above Old Highway 40 at Cisco Grove (see the [Heirloom](#) for December, ’11).

Today there is nothing left of the Club’s headquarters at Cisco except some bits of stone foundation along Old 40 just east of Cisco. The bottom part of their ski hill became I-80 and the Club moved up to Donner Summit at Boreal Ridge.



Auburn Ski Club's Ski Hill at Cisco Grove. Today I-80 cuts across the face of the hill but one of their Pullback toboggans still sits up near the railroad tracks.

Skiing was a bit different in those days.

Today we have high speed quads and great slope grooming, among other things, to make the skiing experience enjoyable and not overly taxing. That of course attracts more of the general public, in addition to hard-core athletes. In the old days that was different. At first there were no lifts at all, but different kinds of lifts began to appear in the 1930’s. There was no grooming until decades later. At Cisco ski jumpers had to “pack the hill” prior to jumping. “This is a tedious tiresome task but it has to be packed hard and smooth so that when they land from a jump, they won’t sink the snow.” (*Ski News* 1/3/33) That meant that skiers sidestepped up the ski area stomping on the snow. Before Silver Belt races at Sugar Bowl some years later, contestants would all arrive a day early and “pack the hill.”

The Ski Enthusiast



Who wants to select the best quality ski equipment from the largest domestic and imported stock in the Sierras is invited to visit our ski department. You will find here **Northland Skis**, America’s finest. Also, Skis from Norway, made by the champion Knut Stromstad, of Risor, together with every accessory. Here are Haug,

Bergendahl, and Northland bindings, ski staffs, and Ostbye Wax for all types of snow. We do expert fitting of skis and repair work.

AUBURN LUMBER COMPANY

Pioneer dealers of Fine Ski Equipment.

Wholesale and Retail.

Auburn, California.

Wendell Robie who founded the Auburn Ski Club also owned the Auburn Lumber Co.

Getting to the Auburn Ski Club in the 1930's

From Auburn to Cisco in January of 1933 it took less than two hours. Highway travel was great.

Said California Ski News, "Our very enthusiastic branch, the Auburn-Marin Ski Club never misses a Sunday at the hill and if you ask one of those fellow about driving time, he will tell you that they are so keen about the sport in all its phases that they just don't think about driving at all. All you have to do is to tie your skis on the car, get on Route 40 and you will be there before you know it."

Another column in the February 21, 1933 issue gave advice for getting to Cisco. By auto it was "178 miles from San Francisco, via Sacramento, on the Victory Highway, driving through Auburn, Colfax, Emigrant Gap, to Cisco Grove." It took five and a half hours from the Hyde Street Ferry (no Bay Bridge yet) although it could take 8 hours in bad weather. After a day of fun, readers were told to leave by 4 so you could be in San Francisco by midnight. If you stay overnight with your auto, be sure to drain the radiator at night and then fill it with hot water in the morning.

You could also take the train and get off at Cisco. Then ski or walk down the tracks to the Auburn Ski Club. You could also go up to Soda Springs and rent skis and then arrange auto transport to Cisco. You could return on the midnight train and be in San Francisco by Monday morning.

The bus was also a possibility.

There were also combinations of the above like storing an auto in Colfax or Alta in stormy weather and taking the train the rest of the way. There was also a water route taking the auto aboard River Lines boat from San Francisco to Sacramento.

Good advice was to travel in ski clothes since it saved time and baggage and was more comfortable in the mountains. Good advice also said to use a knapsack and travel light when traveling to the Club in deep snow.

There were lots of places to stay: Auburn or Colfax hotels, the Monte Vista Inn, Baxter's Resort, Laing's Pioneer Camp, Cisco Grove, and Rainbow Tavern. If you are planning a trip you will want the authentic experience of staying on Donner Summit or nearby. So we include here some relevant ads.

Where to Stay - 1930's

CISCO GROVE

1600 acres of Mountain Paradise
Fishing, Hunting

One of the West's best equipped
Camps

Reasonable Rates

Winter Sports

16 miles West of Donner Lake
U. S. Route 40

Your New Ski Headquarters

THE EMIGRANT GAP HOTEL
NEAR AUBURN SKI HILL

Under new management of
Cortopassi Bros. of Colfax

REMODELED THROUGHOUT

All Rooms Heated

Rates: \$1.00 per person and up

DINING ROOM IN CONNECTION

Skis and Toboggans for Rent

**HERSTLE JONES' RAINBOW
TAVERN**



On
The South Fork
of the Yuba Riv-
er at 5000 feet
elevation

Ride on our new
\$10,000 up - ski
giving 1 mile run
down.

Exclusive Winter and Summer Resort

U. S. Highway 40
Reasonable Rates

Post Office, Soda Springs

Soda Springs Hotel

Equipped for Comfort
and
Winter Sports

Ski Equipment Available

Headquarters of California School of Skiing

MAKE RESERVATIONS NOW

P. O. Soda Springs
Elevation 6800 ft.

From the DSHS Archives

CALIFORNIA HIGHWAYS AND PUBLIC WORKS



*Scene on State Highway No. 37, (U.S. 40)
in Snow Sports Area, near Donner Summit.*

Official Journal of
the Department of Public Works

FEBRUARY 1936

California
Highways and
Public Works
Magazine.

February, 1936

Auburn Ski Club
parking at Cisco
Grove.



From the same magazine, California Highways and Public Works, February, 1936. This article showed the winter use on Highway 40 after it became an all year highway in 1931.

According to the magazine, the above picture shows what happens when parking regulations are enforced and below shows what happens when they are not.

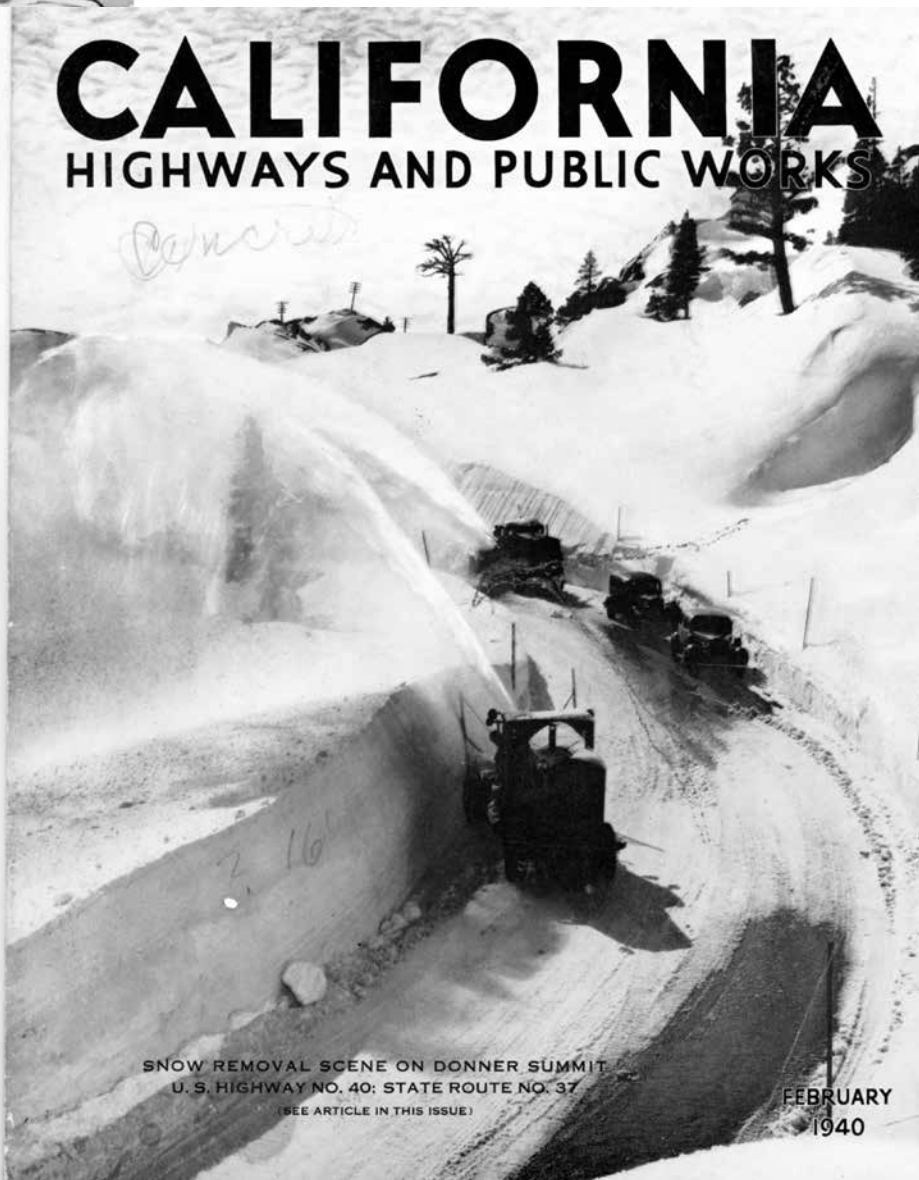
Above and below are at Norden. To the left is at Cisco Grove.





CALIFORNIA

HIGHWAYS AND PUBLIC WORKS



California Highways and Public Works was the magazine of the State highway department. It was wonderful magazine for those who wanted to know every detail of California highways.

The issue on this page was February, 1940 and the article was about clearing snow on State highways. Pictured here above right and right are snow clearing on Donner Summit. Above is taken near Donner Summit.

To see what is meant by "every detail" go to page 16 for an example of snow clearing details, an "Exceedingly Liberal Subsidy."

SNOW REMOVAL SCENE ON DONNER SUMMIT
U. S. HIGHWAY NO. 40; STATE ROUTE NO. 37
(SEE ARTICLE IN THIS ISSUE)

FEBRUARY
1940

From the DSHS Archives

Cisco Grove 1930's



the Compliments of the Cisco Club.

JAMES JOSEPH SHERIDAN.

Truekee, Nov. 14th, 1874.

SIERRA SNOW SHOES.—One of the greatest curiosities of this section is the snow shoes for horses. The following is a description of them as they are in use here: The shoe is made of gutta percha belting, doubled and riveted together strongly. When doubled this belting is about five-eighths of an inch thick, eleven inches in length, and seven inches wide. On the upper side are two curved bands or clasps of iron. These clasps are fastened in front and rear to a staple and link. The clasps are fastened firmly to the horse's hoof by means of a screw passing through them from behind. In light snow horses make fair progress with these shoes, and do not sink down more than six or eight inches on an average. Of course, with these shoes, horses can not go faster than an ordinary walk, but the shoes enable them to go in places where, without them, they could

Sierra Snowshoes

from W. F. Edwards Tourists'
Guide and Directory of the
Truckee Basin, 1883

Sugar Bowl

Opened 75 years ago

Ski Heil was a short lived magazine that was published in Modesto, CA. One month after Sugar Bowl officially opened in January, 1940, Sugar Bowl was the lead article. It was the newest ski resort in California and it had the first "chair-lift" in the State.

How ironic the article noted that the survivors of the Donner Party "tottered and staggered up over the Emigrant Pass, down into Sugar Bowl and out into the wide meadow - now filled with water and known as Lake Van Norden" and in 1940 the area had become the scene of another "pioneering enterprise". The emigrants could not imagine that where they struggled would one day host a "hotel, skating rink, chair-lift and toboggan slide...for thousands of snow lovers, enthusiasts of an element which was nearly to obliterate" them. Where pioneers one "battered through snow twenty feet deep to salvation and life..." now others tumble and laugh. Now "winter sportsmen" worry a fresh fall of snow will be too long in coming.

No one thought of all that though in 1940 as they went "sailing gradually up and up onto the top of Disney Peak a thousand feet in elevation from the Ski Lodge itself." The new chairlift glided along at 4 1/2 miles an hour past 13 steel towers. At the top the views are marvelous, "range upon range of jagged mountains are to be seen for the price of one chair-lift ticket..."

Champion skiers were using the new slopes and guests lying in the sun on the lodge deck jumped up to see "that prince of Norwegian ski jumpers, [Sig Uland] skim over the takeoff on the jump hill... and land... with the swift ease and grace of a swallow. For skaters old time waltzes played and that mingled with the yodeling of skiers descending from Mt. Disney.

Ski Heil, February, 1940



Ski Heil, February, 1940 the first chairlift in California could only accommodate one person per seat

The Sugar Bowl, Paradise for Winter Sports

"Hannes Schroll is his name, schuplattler, yodeler, personality guy and founder of the Sugar Bowl resort. He bawls at a quaking pupil that he skis like a dish of sauerkraut, but is secretly delighted to see those shoulders and hips really swing for the first time since the lesson began.

"A party arrives by motor sleigh from the Southern Pacific station at Norden, all worries left in car number 10 of train number 101; with no other prospects for the next ten days than tumbling around in powder snow, skating and reviving that summer tan. At night blue wine parties or moonlight ski trips will keep him from his bed long after the sandman has passed. It is an exhilarating sport, a paradise for snow fiends.

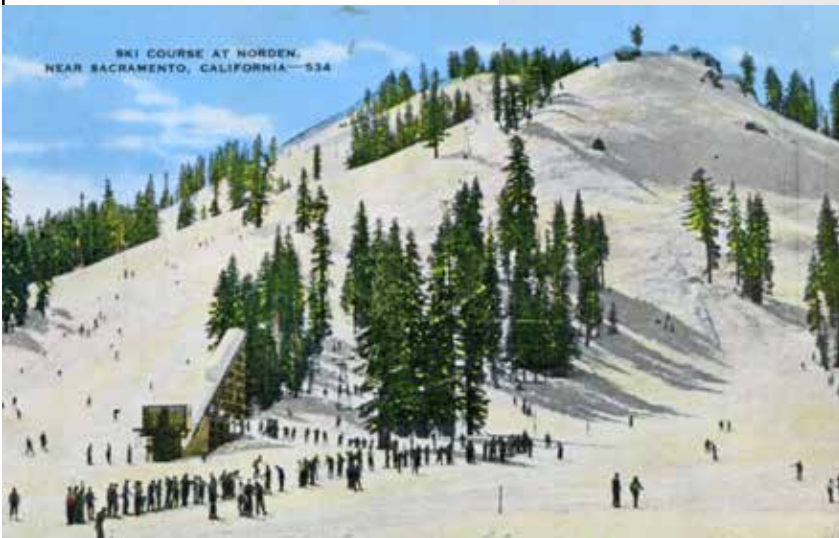
"It is a wonderful enterprise this Sugar Bowl, and one which California winter-sports followers have been waiting patiently for these past three years."

Ski Heil, February, 1940



Left: the lodge at Sugar Bowl, 1942 before additions.
Ski Heil Magazine.

Below:
 Sugar Bowl postcard 1946



left: lines for the first chair-lift in California, 1942.

Below: a little eavesdropping.



Dear Mother, Dad, and

This is a splendid place both for staying and skiing. No comparison between these skis and my others. There was a beautiful snow storm all the way up yesterday, but today is beautiful. I think I'll take a lesson this afternoon. See you about five thirty - Friday

February 26, 1942

Love, Margaret

Mr. and Mrs. J.E. Davis
 1507 Palm Ave.
 San Mateo, Calif. USA

Video Review

Donner Summit is scenic and photogenic and a number of movies have used the Donner Summit scenery.

If you like Abbott and Costello then this 1942 classic will make you laugh. It is full of physical comedy, language confusion, and double meanings reminiscent of "Who's on First." It's one misapprehension after another, an hour and 23 minutes of one comedic routine after another.

Abbott and Costello play two photographers, Tubby and Flash, who are mistaken for Detroit killers by a mobster who is using the hospital as an alibi. The mobster and his goons will rob the bank across the street but since he's feverish and in the hospital, no one will think he could have done it. He's just waiting for the Detroit killers to show up to "watch his back" while he's in the bank robbing it.

Abbott and Costello are "shooting" people with their cameras but the mobster, fitting things into his own frame of reference thinks of another kind of "shooting."

The bank gets robbed and Abbott and Costello go inside after the mobsters leave. Confusion ensues and slapstick comedy. Soon they are accused of the robbery. They escape to "Sun Valley." Coincidentally the mobsters and their doctor, a friend of the comedians, are also on the way to Sun Valley. More confusion follows as Abbott and Costello attempt to capture the robbers.

There are a number of musical numbers too since also going to Sun Valley is a band, the leader of which is also an old friend of Abbott and Costello. As it happens the singer is an old friend of the mobster.

Here's the other reason to watch this movie if you like Abbott and Costello, or the only reason to like the movie if you don't like Abbott and Costello type humor. The movie was filmed partly at the Soda Springs ski area on Donner Summit. You have to

wait some time to get to the Donner Summit scenery but eventually you do. The actual skiing, as opposed to the scenes on the Hollywood sound stages, are on the slopes of Soda Springs. Look into the background and you will see familiar scenery.

Naturally Abbott and Costello turn out to be the heroes after a long, funny skiing chase scene which makes it seem that Soda Springs' Ski Hill is miles long. At the end there's even a little pathos mixed with the humor but we won't spoil the surprises you are no doubt anticipating as you order the movie on the Internet.





Scenes from "Hit the Ice:"

Top: Summit Valley from Soda Springs Ski Area.

Second: Large snowball chasing one of the mobsters looking west from Soda Springs Ski Hill

Third: The entrance to Mineshaft #5 which is really the east slope of Soda Springs Ski Hill, just above Soda Springs Rd.

Look closely at the top and bottom pictures and you can see the snowsheds on the hillsides.



Movies Filmed on Donner Summit or having a subject to do with Donner Summit.

And So They Were Married	12/13*
The Art of Skiing	1/10
Forgotten Journey	7/11
Gold Rush movie	8/11
Transcontinental RR video	12/12
Stephens Party	7/11
Two Faced Woman	1/10

*lists dates movies were reviewed in the [Heirloom](#)

Also featuring Donner Summit but not reviewed in any [Heirlooms](#)

- Bushwhacked Cobb True Lies
- Take It To The Limit Misery
- M.V.P. 2: Most Vertical Primate
- Jack Frost The Forlorn

This list was compiled by Beverly Lewis and written about in her article "Donnerwood" in the March '09 [Heirloom](#)



Then & Now with Art Clark



Summit Station, Snowsheds and Summit Hotel

Getting to Donner Summit in the winter meant riding the train through miles of snowsheds and tunnels. The Dutch Flat wagon road was there, but covered with snow and impassable. The Summit Hotel visible in the lower right was built in 1893 to replace an earlier one which burned. The same fate occurred to this one in 1925. The tree in the center watched it all happen, and is still there today, but told no tales.

Photo location 39°
18.972'N 120°
20.147'W

Early photograph:
E. Peter Hoffman
collection.



Then & Now with Art Clark



This view is from the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road. It is along the inside of a curve above the bridge that washed out sometime in the sixties. Trees and brush are trying to erase the view, but the rocks are still there.
Photo location 39° 19.125'N 120° 19.018'W



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

www.donnersummithistoricalociety.org

Membership

I/we would like to join The Donner Summit Historical Society and share in the Summit's rich history.

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

____ New Membership

MAILING ADDRESS _____

____ Renewing Membership

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

____ Individual Membership - \$30

(Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

____ Family Membership - \$50

____ Friend Membership - \$100

____ Sponsor - \$250

____ Patron - \$500

____ Benefactor - \$1000

____ Business - \$250

____ Business Sponsor - \$1000

Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

If you would like monthly newsletter announcements, please write your email address below VERY neatly.

An "Exceedingly Liberal Subsidy"

Snow Clearing on Donner Summit, February, 1940 from California Highways and Public Works Magazine

The article about clearing snow from the State highways in 1940 included all kinds of details to satisfy the most curious reader. The simplest details were the most obvious. Good communication greatly facilitated "snow fighting" and to that end the State had invested tens of thousands of dollars in new radios. There was also a great need for parking on the newly cleared roads (see the pictures on page 7 for examples not from this article).

The article also delved into the minutiae of snow clearing. It cost an average of \$113,626 to clear the 555 miles of eligible State highway. Over those miles 10,306,000 vehicle miles were driven during the Winter quarter of January through March. That meant it cost \$11.02 per thousand vehicle miles. The average vehicle in those days got 13.5 miles per gallon.

1,000 vehicles used 74 gallons of gas. The gas tax was 3 cents per gallon of which the Department of Highways got 1.5 cents. The tax yielded \$2.22 per 1000 vehicle miles versus the \$4.06 per thousand vehicle miles it cost.

Therefore the snow clearing was not cost effective. It was an "exceedingly liberal subsidy" to keep recreation routes open.

The article did not really differentiate between recreation miles and commercial miles driven although that was mentioned. It also did not touch at all upon the economic benefits, beyond recreation, of keeping the highways open. Open highways were a lifeline to merchants in snow areas. The Truckee Chamber of Commerce at times hired laborers to shovel Highway 40 clear or spread soot on the snow to speed melting. They were desperate for clear roads. In the early years of the 20th Century the Tahoe Tavern in Tahoe City had an annual silver cup race for the first automobile to come over Donner Summit. The resulting annual publicity hopefully would encourage tourists. That's another story for another Heirloom however.

Donner Summit cost way more than other areas for snow clearing: \$12.52 per 1000 vehicle miles. The article also listed the cost to clear snow in each route in the State as well as the number of highway trucks and other vehicles and miscellaneous equipment used to clear snow in the State. The Heirloom's editorial department felt that was too much detail for the modern reader.

Thankfully they kept plowing the roads despite the "exceedingly liberal subsidy."